

# Unsung Heroines: Women and Natural Disasters

The image is familiar: Women and their children weeping amidst the wreckage of their homes and communities, destroyed and forever changed by forces of nature beyond anyone's control. But this dramatic picture tells only one small part of the story. After the television crews depart, women are often the unsung heroines, picking up the pieces and going forward with the painstaking process of rebuilding lives.

Although women play crucial parts in disaster preparedness, mitigation, and recovery, their roles in disasters are often overlooked or ignored. However, history shows that when disasters strike, women sometimes form spontaneous associations to assist relief and recovery efforts. At other times, women's organizations direct their resources for disaster relief and recovery. Women's organizations also partner with international disaster assistance agencies to expedite relief efforts.

Are women more vulnerable to disasters? What are women's capabilities for responding to disasters? What can international organizations do to integrate women more effectively into disaster planning and recovery?

## Vulnerabilities and Risks

The circumstances of women's lives determine how they are affected by disasters and their options for responding. Poor people are generally at greater risk during natural disasters, and women are disproportionately represented among the poor. Lack of transportation prevents poor households from moving themselves and their possessions out of harm's way. Poor families may not learn about impending disasters or evacuation plans because of illiteracy or the absence of telephones, radios, and televisions in their lives. The location of poor neighborhoods and inferior construction materials used to build

homes for the poor are other reasons for greater vulnerability.

The prolonged drought that plagued northeastern Kenya during the early 1990s killed much of the livestock on which the population subsisted. The result was widespread displacement, as people moved to towns in search of relief supplies. The poorest households, most of which were female-headed, settled in displaced persons camps outside the towns. When heavy rains flooded the same region in 1997-1998, these households lost their meager possessions and were displaced again.

Cultural practices, such as a requirement that women be escorted in public by male relatives, can increase women's vulnerability in disasters. For example, during the recurrent Bangladesh floods, many women drowned as a result of their refusal to leave their homes alone.

## During Disasters, Women Take the Lead...

In spite of their high exposure to risk during disaster, women time and again are often key players after disaster strikes. This is often the result of women translating skills acquired through their daily routines into invaluable disaster assistance. For example, drawing on experience gained from managing large extended households, individual women have turned their homes into feeding centers and shelters for displaced

members of their communities. Women's shared commitment to the welfare of their families and communities often leads them to form spontaneous women's organizations during disasters. At other times, existing women's organizations focus their activities to respond to community needs caused by disasters. The examples below demonstrate the ways in which women have galvanized their communities and families, taking the lead to derive opportunity from disaster.

### ...to Tame Hurricane Mitch

When Mitch struck Tegucigalpa, Honduras, communications collapsed. Disaster assistance agencies and the government were unable to get information to the population.

Two days after the flooding started, Raquel Isaula, the coordinator of Sustainable Development Network in Honduras (SDN-HON), realized this disaster demanded immediate attention. While word was just getting out about the vast destruction across Central America, Isaula was busy mobilizing the international community for assistance. She sent an E-mail message to her development-related listserv, inviting subscribers to attend a meeting to start up a disaster information-sharing network. More than 100 people attended the meeting. She borrowed six computers and pulled together a group of volunteers who worked almost non-stop for the next two weeks, analyzing and circulating information about the disaster.

Soon, news was coming in from all over the country and most of it was dire. Isaula created a special listserv for agencies with a particular interest in the flat, vulnerable, region of Mosquitia on the northern coast. Private clinics sent

messages offering medical supplies and were put directly in touch with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). International disaster assistance agencies that had not yet established operations in Honduras were able to identify populations in need of assistance. The Canadian International Development Research Council used the SDN-HON listserv to invite solicitations for \$10,000 grants for disaster recovery. SDN-HON's listserv also helped its subscribers in the government (which include the ministries of forestry, justice, governance, and even the fire department) communicate with international and local NGOs.

For Isaula and her colleagues at SDN-HON, Hurricane Mitch provided proof that the Internet can serve as a medium to save lives as well as distribute information. They want to build on this success by making the technology more accessible to all Hondurans. They have been carrying out demonstrations and training in poor neighborhoods and have obtained international donor funding to conduct a two-day training session for almost 800 computer users. Isaula is convinced these skills will reduce the vulnerability of Hondurans to future disasters.

In northwestern Nicaragua, the Xochitl-Acatl Women's Center quickly mobilized its resources to help local communities recover from Mitch. The center, which works on projects related to violence against women, literacy, and health, dramatically shifted gears. Women distributed food to displaced families and transported food to remote communities. Women provided plastic sheeting to the newly homeless. They assisted communities in

replanting crops to jump start agricultural production and in vaccinating animals to prevent the outbreak of disease. In collaboration with the local government and other NGOs, the Women's Center also contributed to the reconstruction of homes and other infrastructure.

### Showing Donors the Way

In spite of proven capabilities, women are less likely to be consulted during disaster recovery efforts. In fact, relief interventions sometimes unintentionally increase women's vulnerability by overlooking their expertise and authority.

In many societies, women are responsible for managing and allocating food within their families and communities. When disaster response organizations place male leaders in charge of food distribution, they inadvertently undermine women's authority in this critical sector. Also, recovery interventions that target male household heads have often overlooked female-headed households, contributing to differences between men's and women's access to resources. Examples are the legions of rehabilitation programs that target male household heads for education, training and employment, and housing reconstruction.

However, local and international disaster assistance organizations are beginning to recognize the importance of targeting women during all phases of disasters, as the following two examples demonstrate.

### Women Guide an NGO through Flood Response...

In rural Pakistan, the practice of segregating women from men has increased women's vulnerability to natural disasters. Segregation

leaves women dependent upon men for information about flood warnings and for access to disaster assistance.

Pattan, an NGO with a long history in development and disaster assistance, began work with flood-affected communities in 40 Pakistani villages in 1992. Pattan staff identified weaknesses in flood mitigation and preparedness programs, including an inadequate warning system, absence of community organizations, lack of community participation in flood response, and failure to recognize how disasters affect women and men differently.

Pattan set out to improve community flood response by integrating disaster reduction strategies into development policies and projects and incorporating a carefully thought-out gender component into its disaster response program.

Pattan began by organizing forums to encourage community participation in projects addressing disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. However, the practice of sex segregation prevented women from joining the forums in most villages. Women asked that Pattan organize parallel women's forums. These forums soon became the primary vehicle for women's representation and participation in disaster assistance projects. Under more routine circumstances, the initiative to organize women may have encountered resistance. However, because of the vital assistance that Pattan provided in the aftermath of the 1992 floods, the community was receptive to the NGO's proposals.

Male staff could not interact with women in the community, so Pattan recruited and trained

female staff to ensure women's needs were assessed and addressed. It also offered gender training for its staff and analyzed the gender impact of all of its programs. Women were responsible for distributing food, and households were registered in women's names during distributions to ensure female-headed households and women in polygamous households received assistance.

Pattan also involved women in housing reconstruction. Traditionally, the house of a married couple was owned by the husband. However, Pattan persuaded communities to register houses constructed with project funds in the names of both wives and husbands. Before construction began, couples signed a contract stipulating that, in the event of divorce or separation, whoever remained in the house had to pay half its value to the former spouse. Interviews with the women revealed that home ownership had dramatically increased women's status in their families and communities and increased their participation in decision-making processes.

### **...and Lead a Donor Agency through Famine Response**

While rapid-onset disasters such as floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanoes generate media attention, many more people are vulnerable to slow-onset disasters such as drought, famine, and environmental degradation. In Somalia, a combination of drought and civil strife resulted in a famine that killed nearly half a million people in 1992. The United States Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) responded with massive food aid throughout the worst-hit southern portion of the country. In the capital city of



*In Honduras, working on an emergency temporary shelter in the wake of Hurricane Mitch.*

Lisa Pacholek, Cooperative Housing Foundation

Mogadishu, OFDA worked with traditional elders councils to address issues such as the security of relief staff and supplies, reconstruction, and reconciliation. OFDA also relied on the elders councils to oversee the distribution of food throughout the city, including the operation of feeding centers. Although hunger was eliminated for some segments of the population, it was still widespread. This was in part because of looting and in part the result of inefficiencies within the distribution system.

In Somalia, women traditionally are responsible for decisions about food allocation. Women decide how much of the harvest is to be consumed by the family, stored, traded, sold for other goods and services, and given to others to fulfill religious obligations. Representatives of several Somali women's organizations approached OFDA staff and suggested that oversight of the food distribution system be



handed over to women for two reasons. One was related to the appropriateness of placing food distribution in women's hands in the context of Somali culture. Another was related to women's access to the most vulnerable households in the city.

Many men were absent because they had been fighting, had fled to avoid being killed or conscripted, or were employed in other cities or countries. Many households were therefore headed by women. Because Somali women are not accustomed to interacting with unrelated men, the women household heads felt more at ease discussing their needs with other women than with men.

OFDA followed the women's suggestions and found the food distribution system became much more efficient. This experience demonstrated the capacities and commitment of the women's organizations, and USAID and other donors continued to collaborate with them on subsequent projects.

As the cases above illustrate, women are critical to disaster response and recovery. As disaster assistance agencies are discovering, women's skills and knowledge are valuable not just to ensure that recovery efforts reach women, but also as a resource to mitigate damage and ensure quick recovery for all.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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**Pakistan:** Case study adapted from Bari, Farzana, "Gender, Disaster, and Empowerment: A Case Study From Pakistan." *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes*. Enarson, Elaine, and Betty Hearn Morrow, eds., Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998.

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